

**March 6, 2022**

**Matthew 5:38-48**

**“Retaliation & Loving Our Enemies”**

**From the Series, Red Letters: The Sermons of Jesus**

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Today, we are continuing our series through Jesus’ most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. If you think about it, most artists, writers, actors, scientists, maybe even athletes... are known for that one moment, or one book, or film, above all the others... Maybe they have a long career with many successes, but this one film, or book, or discovery is their quintessential work... The Sermon on the Mount is that for Jesus – it is quintessentially, Jesus. In the sermon, we have his vision for what life in the kingdom of God is meant to look like, and how it can be lived out even in the midst of a fallen and broken world in need of restoration.

The question then becomes, who is this sermon for? Who is Jesus addressing? With this very important section of his sermon today, who is the teaching for? The answer, is his disciples... there of course is a great crowd of people around, listening in—but essentially this is a teaching and sermon for followers... it is a teaching for Christians... for those as he has already described in the beatitudes, the opening of the sermon... as those who are POOR IN SPIRIT. As Martyn Lloyd Jones said, “those who are perfectly aware of their own utter inability.”

That’s very important for us to remember today as we consider the themes of retaliation, revenge, and dealing with our enemies... It is perhaps even more important when we find ourselves in the midst of a geo-political situation in which much of the world is having to face aggression, conflict, and uncertain outcomes.

Jesus’ words here, are some of the strongest, and most familiar to us, and to the world frankly... For many who see Jesus as a wise teacher, or a faith leader, these words on loving your enemies likely are what they associate most with the teaching of Jesus... They even praise Jesus for these words...

JC Ryle – the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican bishop of Liverpool, wrote this – “In the first place, if the spirit of these ten verses were more continually remembered by true believers, they would recommend Christianity to the world far more than they do... In the second place, if the spirit of these ten verses had more dominion and power in the world, how much happier the world would be than it is.”

In these ten verses, v. 38-48, Jesus, for the 5<sup>th</sup> time in the Sermon on the mount, uses illustrations to contrast HIS interpretation of the LAW, with how scribes and Pharisees of the day were interpreting it...in Jesus' eyes...their perversion of it...

BONO, the lead singer of U2 was giving an interview some years back, and listen to what he says about the difference between Jesus' way of grace, and the world's way of karma and retaliation: "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma." Saying that the idea of karma is central to all religions, Bono explained: "What you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called grace to upend all that "as you reap, so you will sow" stuff... Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. . .It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity."

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' antidote to the world's own religiosity... so, as we look at these ten verses, I want us to see two points- First, Resistance in Jesus' kingdom, and Second, Loving Generosity in Jesus' kingdom.

### **1. Resistance in Jesus' Kingdom –**

As I said earlier, Jesus is interpreting the law of Moses in such a way that it is in stark contrast to the Pharisees... And here is another clear example- v. 38 – “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

This law, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth...” is found three different times in the first five books of the Bible, what the Jews call the Torah.

First, In Exodus 21, where it's legally used in reference to an unborn child, Second, in Lev. 24 where it's used legally in reference to a fight with a neighbor, and third in Deut 19, when its legally used in reference to false accusation.

In each case, the law is given to judges, those who were responsible for law and order amongst the Israelites... In other words, it was not meant for each and every individual to go around and exact an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, when they

were wronged. It was a legal device used to actually curtail and limit the excess of retribution and retaliation. Do you get that?

If we can limit this, and govern people's desire for revenge and settling scores, then we will have a better society. It was the judges who were given this task, not individuals.

In fact, while the language of the law, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," is HARSH and violent.... It's actually meant to be positive, not negative... This is what Jonathan Pennington, who is a bible scholar points out... what he refers to as the lex talionis, or law according to kind....

This is found outside of the Bible as well, in other ancient cultures.... It's designed to prevent TWO wrongs... to prevent severe retribution and revenge that would far outweigh the initial crime. Revenge... as we have seen throughout history, can easily and quickly get out of hand... this undergirds a lot of even our own Western, and more modern forms of justice.

There was a study conducted a few years back by two researchers seeking to better understand the nature of aggression... in the end they started studying revenge. These two researchers discovered that a person who is insulted or socially rejected feels an emotional pain. Makes sense... The area in the brain associated with pain was most active in participants who went on to react with an aggressive response after feeling rejected. They said, "It's tapping into an ancient ... tendency to respond to threats and harm with aggressive retaliation."

In a follow-up study they were surprised to find that emotional pain was intricately yoked with pleasure. That is, while rejection initially feels painful, it can quickly be masked by pleasure when presented with the opportunity to get revenge. It even activates the brain's known reward circuit, the nucleus accumbens. People who are provoked behave aggressively precisely because it can be a rewarding experience. Revenge really can be sweet.

Jesus then... once again, is affirming the original law.... He's not contradicting it, he's not trying to abolish or abrogate the law...but he EXPANDS the understanding of the law to its truer and deeper sense. He is giving it a holistic interpretation- for the whole person... He is once again, getting to the heart of the law.... The heart of the matter- do not be vengeful, do not take vigilante justice into your own hands... do not be the self-justifying distributor of justice.

Instead, Jesus says, if you are wronged... which when he says, “slapped on the right cheek,” he’s really describing a backhanded slap which would have been an egregious sign of disrespect... If you are disrespected... turn the other cheek and be disrespected more...

And then he goes on a run of this same type of example... if someone sues you for your tunic, let him have your cloak as well... give it all... If you’re traveling and someone forces you to join up with them for a mile, go with them two miles. If anyone is begging of you, looking to borrow... do not refuse them. Jesus is saying... you’ve understood the law in this way, to protect you from one another... but I’m actually calling you to live in the world in such a way that it produces virtue and actually leads to loving your neighbor more than this original law ever could.

He’s telling his disciples, that you should expect to live a life in which you are disrespected, dishonored, where you will experience physical suffering... and I’m telling you not to retaliate...

In fact, LOVE your enemies... Jesus says, v. 43, “You’ve heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy...” Where does that come from? If you go trying to find that in the pages of the Torah, or the entire Old Testament, you won’t find it, because it’s not there... Instead, this was something the scribes and religious leaders introduced themselves... In other words, being asked to see everyone, even our enemies as neighbors is just too high of a hill... it’s too much to ask.

Now, for Jewish individuals at the time, this would have been particularly difficult when it came to the Roman occupation they were living under. They perhaps would have even felt a patriotic duty to hate their Roman overlords. But, Jesus will have none of it... v. 44, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

You see, this is really about a consistent life... a whole life... According to Jesus, we are not meant to hold some people in our minds as neighbors who deserve our love, and some people in our minds as enemies, who do not deserve our love... EVEN if they have harmed us.

What drives our lives as disciples of Jesus is LOVE. An otherworldly kind of love... an agape love... a love that freely gives itself for the good of the one who

receives it... Agape love, as one writer puts it, “springs from the nature of the donor rather than the real or fancied worthiness of the recipient.”

Now, a natural thought they may come to mind... if the resistance of Jesus’ kingdom is to resist the urge to retaliate... to turn the other cheek... and to go even further and LOVE your enemy... How far does this go??

There is a war going on in Ukraine... there is a war going on in Yemen... are we to not do anything when evil or some form of political aggression befalls the world? What about systems of justice and order? Should a society protect itself with arms and forces... should a community protect itself with police forces in light of what Jesus says here? Are Christians meant to be pacifists in the world? There’s no way I can answer all of these questions right now...

But I do think it’s important to address since we are living in the midst of a geopolitical crisis that is playing out in Ukraine, that all of us are watching through social media, and of course the entire world will feel economically... How are we to think Christianly and theologically about war when it breaks out in the world? In the past I’ve spent a good amount of time studying Christian traditions hold to pacifism, and I’ve revisited some of those arguments and discussions this week... I think there are certainly very compelling theological and practical arguments to be made... They are worth listening to, and worth engaging...

With that said, I believe Jesus’s focus here in the Sermon on the Mount, in these 10 verses, does not have nations, governments, or even communities in mind... He has the life of the disciple in mind....

All of us are citizens of a country, of a state... of a city and neighborhood... those bring about certain requirements, those entities have certain laws... And we can read about how the Christian is to live underneath those structures in places like Romans 13, written by the apostle Paul, and 1 Peter 2, written by the apostle Peter... The decisions made by nations, states, and communities are there’s to make and they fall under God’s sovereign control of the world. I do not believe Jesus is talking about global pacifism, or abolishing police forces or not caring about the pursuit of justice to right wrongs.

What Jesus has in mind here, is the life of the disciple... how you and I, and our families interact with our enemies... how we resist the urge to retaliate, or take up revenge.

He is speaking to those who follow him and prohibiting us from holding the attitude, “this person has cheated me or taken from me... I will take everything from them.” Martyn Lloyd Jones said, “It’s an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth until the Spirit of Christ enters us. Then, something higher is expected of us...” Now, with that said, what I hope for... what I long for... Is that more and more people around the world... leaders of nations, leaders of armies, police chiefs, and our neighbors... Would more and more be filled with the spirit of Christ themselves, that as they carry out the duties of their offices... the responsibilities of government, that as they act, they would be themselves be governed by Jesus’ radical call to love our enemies... In doing so, perhaps the strife and problems of the world would be lessened. It’s our hope and prayer.

It is very much like the human heart though, to take this section of Jesus’ sermon, and want to draw lines of what is acceptable and what is not... What is for nations and what is for individuals? What is most at stake for Jesus, and what is most at stake for us... is what I would call loving generosity... v.42 “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

## **2. Loving Generosity in Jesus’ Kingdom**

Leave it to Jesus, to take a topic that usually spirals into debates about warfare, and self-defense, and protection, and dishonor, and revenge... and making it really about generosity and love.

You could say that Jesus is pushing us towards one another... And not just towards those who we naturally gravitate to, or find likeable and enjoyable to love... No, he’s pushing us to love those who are entirely different than us.

v. 44, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you only greet your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

It is easier to love those we choose for friendship. It is easier to have fun with those we share enjoyable things in common with... or we share the same beliefs about the world... Jesus says... that is not remarkable... that is not unique to the life of my disciple... even those who do not believe will do that...

No, the key to all of this... is that the disciple of Jesus has come to the place where he or she recognizes that we are truly poor in spirit... that to have real life is to become dead to self...

Where we no longer feel the push to retaliate, or defend ourselves, or seek revenge... where we no longer hold tightly to our material possessions or our time... Because we are poor in spirit and become dead to self, we are moved with love towards our enemies...

We are ready to be reconciled to those who we are angry with, we can speak truth with REAL love... And we can create habits and space in our lives to actually care about others who are different than us... who are needier than us... who require our tunic AND our cloak...?

Jesus concludes this ten-verse section by really throwing down the gauntlet... with this one statement, all of us, every single one, are leveled... v. 48 – You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.

Now, wait Jesus... I was tracking with you... I mean, it's really gonna be hard for me to not retaliate, and to love my enemies... but now you're calling me to be perfect? Like God the Father himself?

The call Jesus makes is for us to be whole. Consistent. Perfect. That our love for others is consistent and whole, not fragmented towards those we like... and away from our enemies...

Jesus holds the standard before us—God himself, who has perfectly extended his mercy and grace towards his enemies... to us, those who have sinned against him. Jesus holds this standard before us... the standard of God's undifferentiating love...

His undifferentiating love that has found its way to you, and me... that was demonstrated for us when He sent his son to the cross... where Jesus Christ cried out to his Father, "Father forgive them... his enemies... the ones who were torturing and executing him... father, forgive them, for they know not what they do..." His enemies, of which we have stood with... who hurled their insults, yet he did not reply...

It is through this undifferentiating agape love of enemies... Loving generosity... that imparts the righteousness of Christ to us... So, that now... you and I do not have to self-justify...

We do not have to live with the overwhelming desire to right wrongs...  
seek revenge upon those who have wronged us...

On the contrary, because we have died to self, and have been made alive to Christ,  
now we can live with a kind of loving generosity that even sees conflict as the  
opportunity to extend mercy and grace and love...  
That sees enemies become friends and neighbors.

Because we are justified and made righteous in Jesus Christ, we no longer wage  
the war to self-justify, or muster up our own righteousness. The spirit of revenge  
falls. The spirit of retaliation falls. The hoarding of personal possessions falls...  
We serve a sovereign God, who has made his mercy and love known to us in Jesus  
Christ...

And I believe, this even allows us to look out at a world that is torn apart by war...  
and not see it as an occasion to be given to a spirit of revenge or retaliation... but  
an occasion to love. To pray...

To come along side our Christian brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe...  
and pray for the pouring out of loving generosity that moves enemies to become  
neighbors and friends... It is not PIE IN THE SKY... It is the way of Jesus. It is  
exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Let's Pray.



